

Message Text

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ACTION AF-08

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 OMB-01 AID-05 NEA-10 CIAE-00

PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01

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FM AMCONSUL ASMARA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4383

AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON

COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN

COMIDEASTFOR

NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA

NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI

CNO WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0146

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS ET

SUBJECT: INSURGENTS REORGANIZE AND DISCUSS UNITY

1. THERE ARE REPORTS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES THAT THE EPLF CONDUCTED A MEETING OF THEIR CENTRAL COMMITTEE IN EARLY FEBRUARY, AT WHICH TIME THEY ELECTED A NEW LEADER AND CHANGED THE NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION. THE MEETING, WHICH WAS HELD IN ERITREA, ELECTED A MUSLIM NAMED ROMADAN CHAIRMAN OF THE ORGANIZATION AND REAFFIRMED ISSIAS AFEWORKI AS COMMANDER OF THE FORCES IN THE FIELD. INITIALLY THIS MOVE WAS CHARACTERIZED BY ERITREANS IN ASMARA AS A "DEMOTION" OF ISSIAS WHICH WAS ATTRIBUTED TO (A) ISSIAS' HARDLINE MARXIST VIEWS WHICH ARE UNPALATABLE TO CONSERVATIVE ARAB BACKERS OF THE
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ERITREAN SEPARATISTS, AND (B) AN EFFORT BY THE EPLF TO OPEN THE WAY TO BRING OSMAN SALEH SABBE, A LONG-TIME OPPONENT OF ISSIAS, BACK INTO THE FOLD. NEITHER OF THESE INTERPRETATIONS APPEAR TO BE ACCURATE, AS ISSIAS' CONTROL OF THE VITAL POSITION AS FIELD COMMANDER WAS REASSERTED. A MORE PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION IS THAT SINCE SALEH SABBE'S SPLIT WITH THE EPLF, ISSIAS HAS BEEN SPENDING CONSIDERABLE TIME OUTSIDE ERITREA SEEKING SUPPORT FOR HIS ORG-

ANIZATION AT THE EXPENSE OF HIS MILITARY RESPONSIBILITIES.

2. NOT MUCH IS KNOWN OF THE NEW CHAIRMAN ROMADAN, EXCEPT THAT HE IS FROM MASSAWA ORIGINALLY, AND THAT HE IS CONSIDERED TO BE A FOUNDER OF THE EPLF. IRONICALLY HE IS A DISTANT RELATIVE OF OSMAN SALEH SABBE. THE EPLF MEETING ALSO DECIDED TO CHANGE THE NAME OF THEIR ORGANIZATION FROM THE ERITREAN POPULAR LIBERATION FORCES TO THE ERITREAN POPULAR FRONT. THE CHANGE IS THOUGHT TO BE TO FURTHER DISTINGUISH THEIR GROUP FROM THE ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT, AND TO DEMONSTRATE A NEW UNITY WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION WHICH IS NOW TO BE CONSIDERED MORE THAN A COLLECTION OF "FORCES" BUT A TRULY UNITED "FRONT".

3. THERE ARE REPORTS IN ASMARA THAT THE ELF AND THE EPF WILL OPEN DISCUSSION IN KHARTOUM ON FEB 22 TO PURSUE EFFORTS TOWARD UNIFICATION. WHILE LEADERS OF BOTH FACTIONS APPEAR TO APPRECIATE THE NECESSITY OF UNIFICATION, ESPECIALLY AS PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS IN ERITREA IMPROVE, FEW ERITREANS BELIEVE THAT UNIFICATION WILL BE EASILY ATTAINED.

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